

## PUTTING THE PERSIAN BACK IN “MAGIC”:

### PROBLEMS WITH IGNORING ANCIENT ETHNOGRAPHIC DISCOURSES

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#### *Introduction*

This paper calls for careful consideration of the *ancient ethnographic* connotations of specific phenomena often designated “magic” as performed by “magicians” (especially μάγος, μαγεία, μαγικός) and for the retirement of modern terms related to “magic” in the study of antiquity altogether. Deployment of such categories obscures precisely the ostensibly foreign and specifically “Persian” aura which continued to attend ancient understandings of Magians, Magian skill, and Magian knowledge (better terms) while also ignoring ancient theories that Magian practices had disseminated throughout the ancient Mediterranean world (to Babylonians, Egyptians and Judeans, for instance) from the Persians themselves.<sup>1</sup> I demonstrate this with reference to Greek, Roman, and Judean writing on Magians via Philo of Alexandria, Pliny the Elder (the earliest surviving Roman author to broach the subject at some length), Apuleius of Madaura, Celsus, Origen of Alexandria, and the author of the Pseudo-Clementine writings. Regardless of whether a specific author evaluated Magians and their techniques in idealizing or orientalizing terms with the notion of wise “barbarians” or in more overtly negative terms with reference to dangerous foreign activities – or a bit of each – all agree on the

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1 In light of my plan, I was quite intrigued by the title of Graf’s “Theories of Magic in Antiquity” (Graf 2002) only to be disappointed by the neglect of ethnographic discourses and things Persian, even though Apuleius is dealt with at some length. The point here is not at all to suggest that we can posit the dissemination of *actual practices* in historical terms, however, as many such as Fitz Graf and Matthew W. Dickie have attempted to do in speaking of actual historical dissemination of a stable concept of “magical” practice from the Greek world to the Roman.

*ostensible* Persian or eastern connection and virtually all allude to the discourse's home within representations of peoples and competitions among peoples that often entailed expressions of ethnic self-understanding.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, here we are frequently dealing with a component of what a modern scholar would appropriately analyze in terms of processes of ethnic identification. We need to put the Persian back in *mageia* if we want to understand ancient perspectives.

The concept of ancient “magic” has by no means been left by the wayside of scholarship since Harold delivered his presidential address about that topic to the CSBS thirty years ago in 1994, even if it would be hard to speak about any revolutions in our overall understanding in the mean time.<sup>3</sup> Instead, scholarship has gone in circles in many ways, in large part due to scholarly assumptions about what analytical categories should be employed. In this paper, I argue that neglect of ancient thoughts and conversations about Persians and other peoples – of ethnographic representations of others and of ethnic self-definition – is a major part of the problem.

I begin by juxtaposing three apparent facts. The first requires more examples than I would have liked simply due to the continuing scholarly penchant for writing books on “magic,” especially since the mid-1990s: A careful search through recent survey works on “magic” (and we are concerned with phenomena designated *mageia* specifically) turns up extremely few references to “Persians” and only a few more to “Magians” (*Magoi*), but even so without emphasis on the fact that Magians were, for Greeks and Romans, characters with a Persian or at least eastern connection or aura.<sup>4</sup> Absent, too, are

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2 Graf 1999; Dickie 2001, especially 26-27.

3 Remus 1999. For Harold's other contributions to the discussion see, for instance: Remus 1982; 1983; 1996; 1997.

4 A similar thing could of course be said of even earlier volumes: e.g. Faraone and Obbink 1991; Meyer and Mirecki 1995; Graf 1999; Ankarloo and Clark 1999; Dickie 2001; Mirecki and Meyer 2002; Collins 2008. “Magic” in the ancient world is a bit of a cottage industry, to say the least.

focussed discussions about ancient ethnographic discourses in such scholarly works. While the modern analytical categories of “religion” and “magic” dominate such scholarly volumes, ancient Greek ethnographic discourses (inherited by Romans) about eastern peoples and relations among peoples simply do not feature in the study of “magic.”

For instance, in David Frankfurter’s 800+ page edited *Guide to the Study of Magic* (2019), it is only Fritz Graf’s survey of relevant ancient terms related to “magic” that helpfully begins with a focus precisely on *mageia* with its Persian connections (deriving from Persian *magu*), but mainly when dealing with Greek notions of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. However, that etymological origin then seems irrelevant to most of the other contributions in this massive edited volume, where the Persian aura in Greek and Roman imaginations about Magians and *mageia* rarely comes up. A similar momentary attention to the “Iranian cultural background” only to set ethnographic matters to the side can be seen in Marco Frenschkowski’s recent contributions.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Jan Bremmer has a piece on Persian Magians themselves (i.e. those who took on the role of sacrificers in Persia itself), but this appears set apart from Bremmer’s other studies on “magic” as though the two – Magian figures and “magic” – would never meet.<sup>6</sup> And in his co-edited volume on the *Materiality of Magic*, Bremmer deploys the categories of “magic” and “religion” without reference to anything “Persian” as though meanings are self-evident and as though the value of these modern categories for opening up our understanding of ancient perspectives is clear.<sup>7</sup> In an honorary volume for Christopher A. Faraone on

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5 Frenschkowski 2010; 2016.

6 Bremmer 1999 (duplicated in Bremmer 2008).

7 Boschung and Bremmer 2015.

*Magic and Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (2024),<sup>8</sup> it is only Bruce Lincoln’s chapter expressly on “The Problem of the Magi” (the sacrificers in their original Persian setting again) that even mentions Persia when speaking of “magic”-related phenomena. To provide one last example, only two of the contributions in *Ancient Magic, Then and Now* (2020) mention Persians at all, but even they do not delve into the ethnographic context in depth.<sup>9</sup> In the same volume, a survey by Orietta D. Cordovana on “Pliny Between Magic and Medicine,” which of course draws on book thirty where Pliny expressly documents the dissemination of Magian skill from the Persians to other peoples of the Mediterranean, does not even mention the word Persia(n) a single time, nor does it delve into Pliny’s focus on other peoples. Generally speaking, within the *scholarly imagination*, “magic” – encompassing all kinds of interesting or unusual activities the scholar wishes to study or to distinguish from, or relate to, “religion” – just has a life of its own, a life apart from any *ancient imaginations* about Persian connections. I’ll grant that “Persian” or “Magian” in the title of a book is not as sexy as “magic,” but I hope we are aiming for more than sales.

A second apparent fact is that the few scholars who have rightly challenged the usefulness of the category of “magic” for the study of a range of ancient phenomena have almost never done so because of this lack of attention to Persian and other ethnographic matters when it comes to *mageia*, with the exception of some initial steps in this direction by Andrew Durdin. Jonathan Z. Smith rightly calls for the abandonment of the category “magic,” in part, because of its intimate relation to its supposed modern opposites, religion or science, pointing to how thoroughly engrained “magic” is within modern

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8 Edmonds, López-Ruiz, and Torallas-Tovar 2024.

9 Mastrocinque, Sanzo, and Scapini 2020.

concerns and secular modernism itself.<sup>10</sup> But he also does so because of its largely pejorative connotations and polemical force as a term for the “other,” for deviant, dangerous, or illegal practices, which drastically limits its usefulness as a redescriptive category. This ancient polemical framework was a point that Harold had also dealt with at some length in his monograph on *Pagan-Christian Conflict over Miracle in the Second Century* (1983) and Kim Stratton explores in her works on discourses of magic in connection with women, even if these scholars do not call for the complete abandonment of the scholarly category of “magic.”<sup>11</sup> According to Smith, we “have better and more precise scholarly taxa for each of the phenomena commonly denoted by ‘magic’ which, among other benefits, create more useful categories for comparison,” and Durdin follows through by abandoning the category altogether from a Smithian perspective when it comes to the Roman elites, at least.<sup>12</sup> Yet despite attention to “othering” (or alterity) and negative stereotyping in these studies, Smith and other scholars do not fully engage ancient ethnographic discourses, and there is a general neglect of the other side of the coin relating to idealizing approaches to wise “barbarians” such as Persian Magians.<sup>13</sup>

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10 J. Z. Smith 1995. Smith had previously actively deployed the category in developing a somewhat problematic theory in J. Z. Smith 1978. See critique in Harland 2011. Now also see the analysis of Smith’s 1995 piece from a different angle by Durdin 2019, though Durdin’s attention to what he calls “alterity” does not really zero in on ancient ethnographic discourses as much as it could.

11 Stratton 2007; Stratton and Kalleres 2014. Kim helpfully shifts the focus to stereotypes and *discourses* of alterity, but she nonetheless retains the category “magic” or “sorcery” as a rough “equivalent to *pharmakon*, *epaoidē*, *goēs*, *magos*” (Stratton 2007, 26). Harold was in some ways following through on, and further nuancing, Morton Smith’s (1978) work which signalled a turn to “magic” among students of the Jesus movements.

12 Smith 1995, 16; Durdin 2019. Cf. Durdin 2017.

13 See also Otto’s (2013, 314-315) observation that there are also positive uses of *mageia* in reference to one’s own practices in the so-called Greek Magical Papyri. He notes the following: *PGM* I 127, 331; IV 211, 243, 2082, 2290, 2319, 2450, 2454; LXIII 5. *PGM* IV 154-260 is a crucial passage. Though here I am more interested in outsiders’ perspectives within ethnographic discourses.

Stratton does give attention to pejorative Greek ethnographic discourses in one important chapter, it should be noted, though she is focussed on fifth century Athens and does not follow ethnographic leads into later periods.<sup>14</sup> This may be due to limited space in her comparative study, but also, in part, because she imagines a clear shift away from the Persian connection to pejorative stereotypes and seems unattentive to the wise “barbarian” trope. Among these scholars, Durdin gives the most attention to ethnographic matters in his study of the Roman elites and discourses of “alterity” by way of Cicero and Pliny specifically (in chapters 2-3 of his dissertation), coming closer to aligning with my concerns here.<sup>15</sup> But Durdin’s focus on terminological developments in Cicero and Pliny specifically and on consistently deconstructing previous *scholarly approaches* to reconstructing the history of Greek and Roman “magic” results, at times, in him skirting around the point I am making about the *centrality* of ethnographic discourses generally and the people of the Persians specifically when ancient authors do actively theorize about Magian matters (*mageia, magikē*) at some length.<sup>16</sup> My argument here might supply further support for some of his excellent points, nonetheless.

Writing at about the same time as one another, Bernd-Christian Otto (2013) – dealing primarily with Classicists – and David Aune (2014) – dealing with New Testament-types and beyond – call on scholarship to completely set aside the category of magic as problematic for a number of very good reasons, particularly for what we may gain in understanding numerous individual phenomena.<sup>17</sup>

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14 Stratton 2007, 39-70.

15 Durdin 2017, 116-118, 121-134, 154-156 (on wise barbarians), 187-191 (using Tacitus’ *Germania* to delve into Pliny’s approach).

16 Durdin 2017. I should note that I only read Durdin’s works after I had written an initial draft of this paper.

17 Previously, of course, Aune’s own earlier study of magic in the context of the early Jesus movements (Aune 1980) had played an important role in the turn to investigating such matters. He began to clearly change positions in Aune 2007, following through to full rejection of the usefulness of the category with Aune 2014.

Though, again, there is nothing substantial here relating to the need to attend carefully to ancient talk about peoples. Nonetheless, Aune puts one of the crucial points regarding magic's problems most succinctly: "magic functions as a modern overarching term for a kaleidoscope of ancient religious phenomena arbitrarily grouped together under that category."<sup>18</sup> I would offer the important caution that "religion" itself functions in a similarly damaging way, particularly with the baggage of modern colonialist agendas.<sup>19</sup> In general, these scholars agree that *disaggregation* and careful study of phenomena are essential in order to further our understanding of specific ancient phenomena and discourses. Moreover, one of the consequences of the scholarly penchant for grouping so many phenomena under the analytical rubric of "magic" – including the "magical" papyri, curse tablets, binding rituals, ritual experts in a variety of cultural settings, literary discussions of supposed eastern experts and practices – is a loss of specific understanding of any one phenomenon. Many things get lost in the process, including continuing ethnographic discourses and the ambience of foreignness surrounding Greek concepts (inherited by Romans) related to Magian matters, whether expressed in terms of wise barbarian knowledge or pejoratively.

The third and most important apparent fact here is that, as I examine in this paper, virtually every ancient author outside of Persia who, to my knowledge, *consciously theorized* at some length about Magians and *mageia* specifically – whether these ancient authors were Greek, Roman, or Judean (including Jesus adherents in some of these camps) – emphasized precisely a connection to Persia, the aura of things Persian or eastern, and other matters concerning relations among peoples when

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18 Aune 2014, 20.

19 See, for example, Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 2014 (both ranging broadly); Chidester 1996 (on Africa); King 1999 (on India). Also see my forthcoming work Harland 2025 (forthcoming).

explaining what this concept meant not only to them but also, presumably, to others in their own social circles. Persians remained an ongoing and central component in ancient ethnographic *imaginations* about practices associated with Magians (“magicians” in old scholarly terms) and Magian skill or knowledge (“magic” in old terms) not only in the classical and Hellenistic eras, but also well into the period of Roman dominance. This Persian *aura* did not disappear in the first three centuries of the common era.<sup>20</sup>

So this is a problem that goes well beyond the usual scholarly conundrum of – or obsession with – defining “magic” and/or “religion,” both of which I set aside here as unhelpful modern categories that obscure far more than they reveal on this subject.<sup>21</sup> One need not defend setting aside any specific modern categories in academic study (it is up to the scholar to decide what modern categories are most helpful in furthering understanding, regardless of scholar traditions that favour certain categories), although I have already suggested reasons for the abandonment of “magic” which I expand on considerably here.<sup>22</sup> Too much energy has been devoted to the “religion” / “magic” dead end, and almost none at all to the essential ethnographic framework in which to make sense of how many elite and perhaps some non-elite Greeks, Romans, or Judeans imagined those who engaged in Magian

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20 Contrast Stratton 2007, 32-33, who speaks of the Persian connection “disappearing” by the end of the Roman republican period. Based on very meager evidence, Rives attempts to argue for a first century CE shift away from notions about the practices of Persian Magians to “magicians” and “magic” without any Persian aura, especially in the Latin-speaking world (Rives 2009 and 2010). I do not find the argument convincing and Rives does not deal with the Pseudo-Clementine literature, for instance. Among the Latin poets, Lucan (first century CE) is most direct about the Persian connection (e.g. *Civil War* 6.430-432, 439-40, 448-451, 577 [\[link\]](#)).

21 I make a more sustained argument for setting aside “religion” in the study of ancient conversations about peoples in Harland 2025 (forthcoming).

22 Otto (2013, 321 n55) interestingly footnotes a difficulty he foresees in abandoning the category of “magic” while attempting to retain “religion,” but does not fully confront the problem.



technique (*mageia*), or who claimed to know about Magian knowledge (*magikē*). In other words, scholars have not really been interested in placing Magians and Magian activities within the context of ancient conversations about “foreign” peoples and competition among peoples. This is very surprising in some ways, even if we grant the power of scholarly tradition (almost forcing us to frame things in terms of “religion” or “magic”) and the need to sell books by means of sexy titles.

### ***Ancient theorizing about the Persian aura of Magian skill***

Since the scholarly penchant is often to admit a Persian connection for the origins of the Greek word-group *magoi / mageia / magikē* via the Magians and to do the same for *early* outsiders’ perceptions of the concept before the Hellenistic era, but to then elide any reference to the same moving forward in time in the later Hellenistic or Roman eras, I have chosen to focus on cases of ancient theorizing about what “Magian matters” are imagined to be in the first to the fourth centuries CE. This is just a sampling to make the point, rather than some sort of complete survey. The results will clearly establish that, for virtually all such theorizers, a Persian and eastern connection or atmosphere continued to play a central role in the understanding of Magian activities, even when other peoples came to be involved. Likewise, all raise the issue in the context of competition among peoples and, I would argue, these conversations were part and parcel of what a modern social historian would aptly call processes of ethnic identification. Scholars need to always keep this ethnographic framework in mind when approaching the topic, rather than alluding to it and moving on. It is the principal framework from the ancient perspective even if moderns scholars have not shown sufficient interest in it.

*Philo of Alexandria in Egypt (early decades of the first century CE)*

The Judean Philo of Alexandria has been neglected as one of the earliest theorizers of the Roman imperial period. In the context of expanding on deeper meanings in the laws of Moses, Philo deals with the instruction that “you should not keep potion-makers (*pharmakoi*) alive” (Exodus 22:18 LXX; Philo, *On Special Laws* 3.93-103 [[link](#)]). This brings Philo to groups his readers would associate with the concoction of potions aimed at harming others, particularly those of “Magians (*magoi*) and potion-makers (*pharmakeutai*).” So already Philo is engaging what behaviours supposedly set Judeans or Israelites apart from other peoples. Yet what is most significant for us here is that, in the midst of reaffirming Moses’ instruction to immediately execute of such poisoners, Philo also feels a need to make a distinction among types of Magians. There are counterfeit, poisoning Magians who are opposed to proper Judean behaviour and should be killed on the spot, but there are also admirable ones. Please don’t kill those ones.

In arguing this point, Philo begins to theorize about Magian matters, dealing with genuine Magian activities in contrast to counterfeit potion-makers. He argues that “true Magian knowledge (*magikē*), which is the vision of understanding through which the characteristics of nature are clearly viewed, is considered to be an appropriate object for reverence and a source of competition” (*On Special Laws* 3.100). He also clarifies that this is studied by ordinary people (*idiōtai*) and, important for us, by kings, “particularly those among the Persians.” Philo underlines the prominence of Persians in this field, and says that no one could be a Persian king without being admitted into the class (*genos*) of the Magians (*magoi*). However, it is noteworthy that he assumes that Magian ways are no longer exclusive to

Persians, and that there are actually some genuine practitioners beyond Persia. However, the Magians and wise men (*sophistai*) that opposed Moses before the departure from Egypt are evidently not among the genuine ones (*Moses* 1.91). This extension beyond Persia will be significant when we come to other theories regarding the dissemination of Persian, Magian ways. This already shows problems in setting aside Persian and ethnographic matters and speaking merely of “magic” if we want to understand the perspectives of ancient authors like Philo and other social actors in his world. It also shows how important relations among peoples were, in this case relations between Judeans, on the one hand, and Persians and other peoples who adopted genuine Magian skills, on the other.

This affirmation of genuine Magians is not a momentary thing for Philo. Like some other Greek-speaking authors before and after him, Philo includes elite Persian Magians among his own list of wise “barbarians.” In *Every Good Man is Free* (71-97), for instance, Philo places both Persian Magians and Indian naked sages (dealing with Kalanos at length) among men of “highest excellence” among “barbarians.” In that case, Philo calls up the Magians in order to suggest that Judeans have their own similarly excellent group of eastern wise men in the Essenes. By the way, others such as Josephos would be likewise concerned to enter these conversations about peoples in suggesting that certain Judean groups were clear instances of wise “barbarians,” even if Josephos does not focus on comparing the four Judean “sects” with Magians specifically (Josephos, *Life* 7-12; *Judean War* 2.111-113 and 119-166; *Judean Antiquities* 13.171-173 and 18.11-25 [\[link\]](#)).

Philo and Josephos are here participating in long-standing Greek ethnographic conversations about which foreign peoples could be considered a source of elements of true wisdom to supplement (ostensibly) superior Greek wisdom. Despite, or because of, tensions over Persian imperial

encroachment (559-331 BCE), Persian Magians entered Greek conversations very early alongside Babylonian Chaldeans, with Indian naked sages or Brahmins only entering later in the wake of Alexander's conquests and Celtic Druids entering still later with Roman conquests in Gaul (after 121 BCE and, especially, after Julius Caesar's campaigns in the 50s BCE).<sup>23</sup> Often the framing of wise "barbarians" is guided by conquest or imperialism, in part because these are contexts in which there is an increase in culture-contacts between peoples and in part because the elites within dominant groups feel a need to categorize newly discovered populations.

There are two main approaches to Magians from very early on which already pop up in surviving evidence from the late fifth century BCE. From the get-go, there are Greeks who primarily evaluate Magians in denigrating manner as part of elite Greek attempts to identify themselves as a superior people over against elite "barbarian" Persians.<sup>24</sup> And there are those who evaluate Magians paradoxically as wise foreigners, with other possibilities of mixing these opinions depending on the situation (as we just saw with Philo in the first century). The rejection of Magian knowledge comes through very clearly in the late fifth century Hippocratic work on the *Sacred Disease* ([link](#)), where the author argues that this disease is no more sacred than any other disease. But, in the process, he needs to contend with alternative healers and sources of secretive knowledge for healing that were actually trusted or admired by other Greeks, especially Magian techniques. The Magian healing practices listed include purifications, chanting over someone (or incantations), and refraining from contact with certain

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23 Virtually all of the primary sources dealing with each of these wise "barbarians" (much too long to list here) is gathered at this [link](#).

24 Stratton (2007, 40-45) helpfully explores the parallel development of the "barbarians" label and discourses of "magic" precisely in Greek relations to Persians and Persian power, but she does not broach this important wise "barbarian" Magian paradox.

foods and animal or plant products. These Magian things do not work and are perhaps even dangerous, according to this Greek author. Obviously the Hippokratic author is contending with a situation where other Greeks were in fact turning to such Magian methods. This is further underlined in an early example of the opposing view: the contemporary Greek author of the Derveni papyrus (column 6, [link](#)) presents Magian techniques of prayers, sacrifices, and driving away lower spirits to protect souls (or “Furies”) as an exemplarily model for what the initiates in the author’s own circles (where Orpheus is a favourite figure) hope to do.<sup>25</sup> These alternative ethnographic approaches from the Greek perspective continued in subsequent centuries.

The categorization of Magians as wise “barbarians” seems to have hit one of its peaks with the early Peripatetic sect in the late fourth century BCE.<sup>26</sup> Aristotle himself is said to have written a work on *Magian Matters*. More than five hundred years later, Diogenes of Laertes (*Lives of Philosophers* 1 [link](#)) can be found complaining about Aristotle but also about other Greeks who still affirmed the idea of “barbarian” wisdom, including wise Persian Magians, revealing that lively conversations continued. For Diogenes, it is only Greeks who are the wise ones and there is no point in spending much time on supposed foreign sages. In all cases, elite educated Greeks feel a need to define themselves by comparison with, or in contrast to, their elite counterparts among other more distant peoples. Greek self-understanding is shaped by these conversations about Persians and ostensibly Persian phenomena.

So a Judean like Philo was interjecting in ethnographic conversations in a way that shows a keen awareness of the foreign origin and continuing Persian *aura* of Magian ways, even if he preferred some Magians over others (i.e. the “potion-makers”). On the “potion-makers” interpretation and the notion of

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25 On this see Edmonds 2008.

26 On the notion of wise “barbarians,” see my own recent article: Harland 2024.

distorted forms of Magian practice, note the similarity here with the popular misconceptions discussed by Apuleius further below. The fundamental importance of the supposed Persian character of Magian ways also comes through clearly in Pliny's extensive dealings with the subject just decades after Philo. However, unlike Philo, the Roman author Pliny primarily looks down on all things Magian and excludes Magians from the wise "barbarian" category precisely in an effort to affirm what he considers proper Roman ancestral customs.

### *Uncle Pliny (mid-first century CE)*

Having said that Pliny is among those who come down hardest on Persian wisdom as embodied in the Magians, there is a caveat.<sup>27</sup> Before delving into medicinal materials in books 28-30, Pliny describes (pseudepigraphical) works on the "amazing" power in plants attributed to the Greeks Pythagoras (sixth century BCE) and Demokritos (fifth century) without any apparent negative judgments (*Natural History* 24.156-167 [[link](#)]). Precisely in conjunction with the notion of foreign wisdom from far-off countries, traditions had grown up around specific Greek "pursuers of wisdom" (*philosophoi*) – such as Pythagoras, Demokritos, and Plato – that emphasized their ostensible encounters with, or journeys to, foreign eastern sages, including Persian ones.<sup>28</sup> Here Pliny reflects now widespread traditions that have

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27 Most scholarship on these books of Pliny continues to speak only in terms of "magic." For a recent examples with bibliography, see Belousov 2020. Durdin (2017, 136-193) is a welcomed exception which does deal with some ethnographic dimensions, but he is more focussed on establishing Pliny as a creative rather than derivative writer of a history. Among the earlier approaches to Pliny's theory, see Garosi 1976.

28 **Demokritos:** Pseudo-Demokritos (ca. 60s CE), *Four Books: On the Making of Purple and Gold – Natural and Secret Questions* 3-4; Pseudo-Demokritos in Synesios (Synesius), *Letter to Dioskoros* (fourth century CE); Cicero (mid-first century BCE), *On Ends* 5.87 ([link](#) to sources). **Pythagoras and Plato:** Cicero (mid-first century BCE), *On the Republic* 1.16 and *On Ends* 5.87; Diodoros of Sicily (mid-first century BCE), *Library of History* 1.96.1-9; Valerius Maximus (mid-first century CE), *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 8.7, ext. 2-3 ([link](#) to sources).

Pythagoras and Demokritos as the bridge that brought Persian, Magian knowledge about amazing plants and their medicinal value to Greek societies. So, for instance, it is without judgment that Pliny describes how Demokritos talks about plants and potions which the Magians use to “call up gods,” to provoke spirits to haunt a guilty person, to punish someone guilty of sacrilege, to affect the beauty of children at conception, and to effectively heal all the illnesses a Persian king may face.<sup>29</sup> Later on, Pliny will deal with this cross-cultural transmission from Persia at some length, but with a highly critical spin instead. Perhaps it makes a considerable difference to Pliny when such practices find their way into Roman elite contexts, rather than Greek ones. Note that Pliny’s description of Magian knowledge as *vanitas*, “empty” or “false,” is paralleled by his own similar categorization of Greek practices and knowledge at various points.<sup>30</sup>

It is in his more detailed discussion of healing that Pliny chooses the Magians as his principal nemesis. Pliny’s emphasis in his discussions of medicinal materials is how nature has supplied ready access *to anyone* in a way that provides healing, which is why he finds it valuable to discuss plants and other natural ingredients at length; the other side of the coin is that any more *complicated* method with hard-to-find ingredients or the need for some *foreign expertise* goes against Roman ancestral custom, and is therefore illegitimate (cf. *NH* 24.5). This discussion is part of Pliny’s definition of what it means to identify as proper Romans, then. The potential danger of eastern practices, particularly those associated with Chaldeans (as experts in astrology) and Magians (as experts in chants, healing and

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29 On the notion that this sort of pseudepigraphical literature is perhaps one of Pliny’s main sources for his outline of Magian use of substances, see Dickie 1999, 173-183.

30 On false or empty (*vanitas*) Greek practices and knowledge, see: *NH* 2.248, 3.152, 19.86, 28.112, 37.31, 37.195. Cf. Durdin 2017, 150.

lower spirits, but sometimes also astrology), infiltrating elite social circles in Rome itself was likewise a concern for some others among the imperial elites. This can be clearly seen in incidents reported by the likes of Valerius Maximus, Tacitus, and Suetonius ([link](#) gathering examples).<sup>31</sup> But whichever of these incidents actually did take place simultaneously point to other elite and non-elite Romans with a great interest in precisely such foreign expertise associated with Magians and Chaldeans. So Pliny was not completely alone in defining Romanness in juxtaposition to Magians specifically, despite his protests about being alone.

Most crucial for us here is Pliny's extensive explanation of the origins of Magian knowledge and its geographical dissemination while drawing on numerous Greek sources, including Apion of Alexandria, by the way (*NH* 30.18).<sup>32</sup> At the beginning of book thirty, Pliny, who feels solitary here (at least for rhetorical purposes), claims that "this most fraudulent of all skills (*artes*) has held complete sway throughout the world for many ages" (*NH* 30.1-2). The reason, he says, is that it combines three separate skills into one *complicated* and *foreign* system that exploits people's emotions (*sensa*) on all counts: (1) skills relating to healing (*medicina*), (2) skills pertaining to conscientiously fulfilling ritual obligations (*religio*), and (3) skills in making calculations concerning astral phenomena, especially producing horoscopes (*mathematica artes*).

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31 E.g. Valerius Maximus (early first century CE), *On Superstition* 1.3, as summarized by the later Epitomes of Nepotianus and Paris; Tacitus (ca. 109 CE), *Annals* 2.27; 3.22; 12.22; 12.52; 16.14; Suetonius (ca. 120 CE), *Tiberius* 36; *Nero* 34; *Vitellius* 14; Ulpian (ca. 200 CE), as cited in *Mosaicarum et romanarum legum collatio* 15.2.1. Compare reports by Plutarch (early second century CE), *Sulla* 5, 37; *Gaius Marius* 42; and, *Galba* 23.4; Dio Cassius (early third century CE), *Roman History* 49.43.5; 57.15.7-9.

32 This may be Apion's work on *Egyptian Matters* or perhaps *On the Magian* or *On Homer the Magian*, as attributed to Apion in the the Suda lexicon, pi 752. Cf. Rives 2009.



It is immediately following this introductory complaint that Pliny dives into the geographical origins of this system, pinpointing Persia and eastern peoples as the source and a continuing center even in his own day (*NH* 30.3). Pliny is not the earliest author writing in Latin to mention Magian matters and to pinpoint a Persian setting for the origins of a Magian body of knowledge, as Catullus and Cicero show (both in the mid-first century BCE or a bit earlier),<sup>33</sup> but Pliny is the most thoroughgoing and he too draws on Greek ethnographic traditions in the process. There is “no doubt,” he says, that Magian skill “arose in Persia with Zoroaster.” All his sources are agreed, he claims, whether they are affirmative of the skill (e.g. Eudoxos, Aristotle in *Magian Matters*, Hermippos in *On Magians*) or opposed to it like Pliny.<sup>34</sup> In this view, this long-lasting tradition also had early eastern exponents in Media, Babylonia, and Assyria, followed by experts in Phoenicia and Egypt (from whom the Greek Demokritos would learn). In another passage, Pliny once again talks about Pythagoras (sixth century BCE) and Demokritos (fifth) deriving knowledge from “Magians of Persia, Arabia, Ethiopia and Egypt” (25.13-14). Furthermore, in Pliny’s view it is the Persian Ostanēs – accompanying king Xerxes (ca. 486-465 BCE) – who first produced a written work on the topic and further promulgated the skill in written form, dealing with “predictions from observation of water, globes, air, stars, lamps, basins and axes, and by many other methods, including conversing with spirits of the dead and those in the

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33 Catullus, *Poems* 90 ([link](#)), from the early first century BCE; Cicero, *On the Republic* 3.14-15; *On Laws* 2.26-27; *Tusculan Disputations* 1.108; *On Divination* 1.23 ([link](#)), from the mid-first century BCE. On Cicero, see the extensive discussion by Durdin 2017, 121-135. Roughly contemporary with Pliny is Lucan’s poem on the *Civil War* which also assumes a Persian aura around Magian things, comparing Magians to Thessalian women like Erichtho (*Civil War* 6.430-51, 577).

34 Gordon (1999, 229-231) speculates that Pliny’s entire history of “magic” derives from Hermippos (early second century BCE) and that this reflects a strong view or well-developed sense of “magic” as a stand-alone concept. However, see Durdin’s insightful critiques (Durdin 2017, 172-177).

underworld” (30.8). But it already had a much longer promulgation of thousands of years in oral form before that, with the length of time depending on how one dated Zoroaster and on whether there was more than one Zoroaster, according to Pliny.

Nonetheless, before Ostanos wrote that work, even Greeks were travelling east to acquire Magian knowledge. As we have already seen, Pliny tends to buy the notion that Pythagoras travelled to learn this skill and here in this section Pliny adds Empedokles (again sixth century BCE). But it is Demokritos (fifth century), Pliny thinks, that really played the critical role in bringing Magian ways to the Greeks. So Greeks end up among the first non-eastern people to acquire the knowledge in this scheme and to enter the competition for adopting the most effective and wise foreign customs. Competition among peoples for recognizing and developing superior wisdom is central.

At this point Pliny moves on to other peoples who gradually came to adopt Magian practices. Judeans feature prominently next, with Moses and others as proponents. It seems that Pliny knows about Judean legends that grew up around previously unnamed Egyptian experts (*sophistai*), potion-makers (*pharmakoi*), and chanters (*epiaoidoi*) of the Exodus traditions (Exodus 7-8 LXX). However, he thinks of Jannes as a Judean figure, rather than an Egyptian one. We know that Judeans continued to expand on stories of Jannes and Jambres for quite some time, by the way, sometimes imagining them having trained Moses himself in Magian practices and eventually some traditions have these two figures recognize their errors and switch to Judean ways ([link](#)).<sup>35</sup>

Pliny then goes on with his outline of the continuing spread with a focus on peoples: Cypriots, Italic peoples, Celts (Druids in particular), and Britons are included. “Even today Britannia practises it

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35 Cf. Apuleius, *Defence* 90. See Gager 1972, 137-140; Pietersma 1994.

in awe with such grand ceremonies that it might seem that Britannia gave it to the Persians. It is so universal throughout the world, even though the peoples disagree or are unknown to each other” (*NH* 30.13).<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, Magian techniques end up in Rome itself, with Nero put forward as a practitioner (trained by Tiridates the Magian from Armenia); Nero finds these methods ineffective in the long run (*NH* 30.14-18). Yet one of the points Pliny has in mind here, since he highly dislikes the phenomenon, is that the Romans were the only ones to do anything about the problem, sweeping away such “monstrous things” in places like Britannia by means of conquest (recently in 43 CE).<sup>37</sup> Not totally unlike Philo, Pliny has to admit that there are various *types* of Magian skill, seemingly corresponding to developments in the dissemination to different regions in this case. However, for Pliny all types are “savage and barbaric,” packed with lies (*vanitates*), and the equivalent of complete fraud, at least at this point in his argument (*NH* 30.14). And, of course, they all ultimately come from Persia, according to Pliny and his sources (as interpreted by Pliny).

In the next section, Pliny goes into great detail about the supposed tricks that Magians use to hide their healing frauds, but that need not detain us here. Time for someone who has a more balanced – or at least not entirely dismissive – view on the whole thing, but who still shares in common the emphasis on the foreign, Persian aura.

*Apuleius of Madaura in northern Africa (mid-second century CE)*

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36 Trans. Rackham 1938, adapted.

37 It is worth noting that this fits one of Durdin’s (2017, 141) main points about Pliny’s “specific meditation on the plurality and diversity that resulted from Rome’s imperial action.”

Family squabbles bring us our next valuable source underlining the fact that most elite Greeks and then Romans and others (this author self-identifies as African, half-Numidian and half-Gaetolian despite education in Latni)<sup>38</sup> thought of Magian skill as eastern and specifically Persian in origin.<sup>39</sup> Ethnographic factors, talk about foreign peoples and wise “barbarians” (rather than, say, “religious” factors) continued to guide thinking about the matter in second century Roman Africa. The family struggles that led to a trial (in the African town of Sabratha in Proconsular Africa) over the accusation that Apuleius had engaged in Magian activities need not occupy us much at all. I will simply say that an angry former brother-in-law of Apuleius’ then wife, Pudentilla, who wanted control of the family fortune, was behind the accusation that Apuleius had seduced Pudentilla by Magian means and had also murdered his step-son as well. The latter, phoney charge was dropped before the trial. We do not know what Roman laws the accuser, Aemilianus, appealed to in the case before the Roman proconsul of Africa, Claudius Maximus, around 158 CE. However, there is a possibility that the so-called “Cornelian Law against Murderers and Poisoners” (*Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis*), first introduced in 81 BCE by Sulla, but subsequently modified and supplemented in less than clear ways afterwards, may be among the factors.<sup>40</sup> Most pertinent here regarding later revisions or interpretations is Quintillian’s late first century brief mention of debates about whether or not, in a Roman legal setting, “the chants of Magians are equivalent to poisoning (*an carmina magorum veneficiura*)” (*Institutes of Oratory* 7.3.7).

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38 Apuleius, *Defence* 24-25 ([link](#)).

39 For a recent study of Apuleius in terms of “magic,” with extensive bibliography, see Rives 2003 and 2010 and Costantini 2019. For an earlier sociohistorical approach, see Bradley 1997.

40 See Rives 2003, although I do not agree with Rives’ methodological starting point of assuming the value of the etic category of “magic” to make sense of this material.

What matters most for us is what Apuleius theorizes about Magian matters in the midst of his defence against the charge that he had originally used Magian techniques (supposedly using fish products in his potions) in order to seduce the wealthy Pudentilla. His main response is that he did not engage in any secretive techniques, but that genuine Magian ways (as opposed to the ludicrous practices in the accusations) are, in fact, to be highly respected nonetheless (*Apologia / Defence*, especially 1-3, 9, 24-32, 42-43, 48, 78-79, 82-84, 90-91, 103 [\[link\]](#)). So Apuleius clearly places Magians among wise “barbarians,” unlike Pliny and similar to Philo in some ways. In the process of defence, some of Apuleius’ thoughts about these Magian matters therefore become clear.

As a defense strategy, Apuleius – presenting himself as a lover of wisdom (*philosophus*) defending wisdom itself – proposes that he is being charged with *being* a Magian (*magus*) and of engaging in Magian harmful actions (*magicorum maleficiorum*; *Defence* 1). Overall, Apuleius denies the charge of being a Magian but he opens up the debate on what exactly a Magian is. His response focusses considerable attention not only on Magian matters and their Persian connection, but also on distinctions between genuine Magian activities, on the one hand, and popular misunderstandings of them (i.e. pejorative attitudes about them) which form the basis of the accuser’s charges, on the other (*Defence* 25-26). Apuleius states:

If what I read in a large number of authors is true, namely, that Magian is the Persian word for our “priest” (*sacerdos*), what is there criminal in being a priest and having appropriate learning, knowledge, and skill in all ceremonial law, sacred duties, and ritual obligation (*religio*), at least if Magian knowledge (*magia*) consists in what Plato presents in his description of the methods employed by the Persians in the education of their young princes

[cf. Pseudo-Plato, *First Alkibiades* 120-124, quotation omitted here]? . . . Do you hear, you who so rashly accuse the Magian skill itself? It is a skill acceptable to the immortal gods, full of all knowledge of worship and of prayer, full of piety and wisdom in things divine, full of honour and glory since the day when Zoroaster and Ahura Mazda established it high-priestess of the powers of heaven.<sup>41</sup>

Note some similarities with Philo's distinctions, as both Apuleius and Philo independently reflect widely circulating notions about Magians and their connection with the Persians. Apuleius shares with Pliny the emphasis on a connection with Zoroaster. Apuleius presents both Plato (25-26, 43) and Pythagoras (31) as Greeks who appreciated the value of Magian knowledge, and Apuleius concurs with those pursuers of wisdom. He also presumes that Zalmoxis the Thracian was trained in Magian knowledge (26). That is, genuine Magian knowledge, which evidently originated in Persia, also spread elsewhere in his way of thinking (as in Pliny's). Apuleius sees this as a noble history, whereas Pliny did not. However, his accusers reflect other local opinions that wrongly suggest that Magians are people that go around harming people by means of incantations and poisons (compare Philo's non-genuine Magians). In other words, Apuleius' local opponents are more in line with Pliny's thinking.

So, overall, Apuleius and Pliny would not see eye-to-eye on evaluating whether these techniques were acceptable, but they would be on the same page with respect to important aspects of their origins, diffusion, and continuing Persian aura. It also seems that Philo and Apuleius might share something in common in their concern to defend the value of "genuine" Magian ways when linked in some way to wise Persians.

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41 Trans. Butler 1909, adapted.

*Celsus (after 130 CE) and Origen of Alexandria (ca. 244 CE)*

Celsus and Origen share a hell of a lot in common, despite Origen's massive tome refuting Celsus almost a century later.<sup>42</sup> There is, of course, the fact that both associate themselves with the Platonic sect's form of pursuing wisdom. But they also both share the assumption that Magian ways originated in Persia and disseminated elsewhere. Crucially, and not often noticed, both to some degree acknowledge a certain degree of value and effectiveness in Magian knowledge while simultaneously thinking negative thoughts about specific practices that likewise came to be associated with Magians, at least in the popular imagination (similar to some of Philo's and Apuleius' distinctions). Both clearly share a concern to emphasize "barbarian" wisdom, even if they vary in where they position specific peoples in an ethnic hierarchy, with Celsus rejecting Judeans from the competition and Origen focussing on them as the ultimate source of wisdom.

Celsus is among those Greeks who clearly and emphatically affirm the notion of "barbarian" wisdom. In fact, Celsus' work (dated in the decades after 130 CE) as preserved in Origen's response (around 244 CE) is the most extensive surviving exposition of the Greek notion of wise "barbarians." At the outset of his work, Celsus enumerates populations from whom he believes the intelligent Greek can derive aspects of the ancient, true wisdom. However, and this is Origen's main complaint, of course, Celsus "will not call the Judeans a 'wise people' in the same way in which he does the Egyptians, Assyrians, Indians, Persians, Odrysians [a sub-group of "Thracians"], Samothracians, and Eleusinians" (*Against Celsus* 1.14). This is not a momentary lapse for Celsus but rather the organizing

<sup>42</sup> For a helpful discussion of Origen's stance on the use of divine names to ward off lower spirits which requires attention to Celsus' accusations to some degree, see Šedina 2013. Cf. Janowitz 1991. Still worth consulting is Gallagher 1982.

principal for his entire work, which assumes that the educated elites among foreign peoples sometimes preserve remnants of the *True Discourse*. Persians are included here, but especially elite Magians among the Persians. So Magian knowledge (*mageia*), for Celsus, preserves important ancient truths and Magian skill is in fact effective when it comes to any matters under the sway of lower spirits (*daimones*) active in the earthly realm, who can “heal the body, or foretell the fortunes of men and cities, and do other such things as relate to this mortal life” (8.60; cf. Plato, *Symposium* 202d-203a). The technique is most effective for anyone not properly educated in the *protective* pursuit of wisdom (*philosophia*) and who is therefore more easily damaged by the activities of such lower spirits (*Against Celsus* 6.41). Very important for us here is that both Celsus and Origen agree that this Magian body of knowledge disseminated from the Persians to other peoples. For Celsus, this “divinely-inspired” Persian Magian technique was “transmitted to other peoples,” including Egyptians (6.80). Origen agrees about the transmission.

On the other hand, and this is crucial, for Celsus Judeans are always excluded from the category of wise “barbarians.” Celsus instead suggests that both Moses and Jesus derived all of their apparent wisdom and powers from foreign sources, primarily Egyptian ones but also, indirectly, Persian and Magian ones. Their approaches are derivative. Both Moses and Jesus were trained in Magian matters while in Egypt (1.26, 28, 38, 45, 46, 68; 3.46; 4.33; cf. Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.30.1). However, they and their followers misunderstood, distorted and misapplied this knowledge. So when Celsus critiques Judeans and Jesus adherents for their engagement in Magian activities, it is not these techniques themselves in their proper Persian form but deceptive *distortions* of them that are under attack.



This goes along with comparing the practices of Moses and Jesus with Greek notions associated with the howling of chants (*goēteia*) – viewed as problematic – to achieve certain ends regarding lower spirits. So, for instance, both Moses and Jesus deceptively attribute their abilities to the Judean god, even though those abilities are in fact simply derivative of an Egyptian interpretation of the original and effective Persian Magian knowledge and accompanying skills. Moreover, Moses, Jesus, and followers improperly use their distorted knowledge to harm others (cf. 6.40).

We cannot go into the details of Origen’s response but it is important to note that his assessment of Magian matters is not entirely dismissive. Origen also has to give Magians some credit for astral knowledge and for coming to worship the infant Jesus, due to the gospel of Matthew’s account. (Origen likes to point out Celsus’ incidental mistake in thinking that these were Chaldeans, rather than Magians, in Matthew’s narrative. Mixing up eastern Chaldeans and eastern Magians was not uncommon in Greek ethnographic discussions). Moreover, for Origen, “Magians are familiar with lower spirits (*daimones*) and call on them by a chant (*epōdēs*) for their own purposes, and they get results as long as nothing more divine and powerful than such lower spirits or invocations appear or is recited. But if some greater divine manifestation takes place, then the powers of the spirits are overthrown, being unable to resist the divine light” (*Against Celsus* 1.60). Magian techniques work, but Judeans and Jesus adherents have even more effective, superior power over lower spirits. Origen also goes on in some detail about the effectiveness of using – likely chanting – Hebrew divine names to ward off lower spirits, presumably including those responsible for illnesses. So Judean methods outdo Persian ones, and we are back into the competition among peoples and ethnic self-definition.

Despite the complicated back and forth in Origen’s refutation of Celsus, which we cannot go into in detail here, the Persian aura of Magian activities once again prevails in the overall conversation. Celsus evaluates genuine Magian technique *in its Persian form* in an apparently positive way, but Origen is more hesitant about that even though he believes in the effectiveness of Magian techniques for warding off lower spirits, of using even more powerful Hebrew divine names in chants, and of Magian methods of astral observation. We can now turn to the authors of the Pseudo-Clementine writings, who likewise continue to associate Magian knowledge with Persians or other easterners but who go out of their way to “demonize” it (almost literally) by spinning an even earlier history.

***Pseudo-Clementine writings (second-fourth centuries CE)***

Magians and their skills are by no means a side-issue for the authors of the material incorporated within the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* and *Homilies* (reflecting perspectives from the second through fourth centuries CE).<sup>43</sup> These writings reflect a form of Jesus adherence that is inseparable from a continuing sense of following Judean ancestral ways, as is well-known.<sup>44</sup> The entire novelistic story of Clement begins with his search for truth. Training in Magian skill – in this case too among Egyptian wise men – is among his key plans to solve his conundrum (*Recognitions* 1.1-5). The eastern, Judean wisdom that Clement will soon encounter in the Judean sage, Peter, will trump such eastern Magian knowledge, though. Then there is the prominence throughout the story of the figure of Simon

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43 For relatively recent bibliographies on this literature, see Kelley 2006 and 2008 (even though she does not deal with these passages in any depth) and Jones, F. Stanley and Patricia Duncan. “Pseudo-Clementines,” *e-Clavis: Christian Apocrypha*. Accessed April 17, 2024 ([link](#)).

44 E.g. *Letter of Peter* 2.2-5; *Homilies* 2.16-17 and 17.13-19.

the Magian (Simon Magus), a figure who appeared briefly in the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles but was developed by some heresy-hunters into a model opponent or heretic.<sup>45</sup> The competition between Peter the “authentic” follower of Jesus and Simon the Magian (a cipher for Paul) in the Pseudo-Clementines is so central to the ongoing plot that there is no way to fully cover all of that material here. Suffice it to say, Peter and his God win the competition against Magian tricks by way of many “miracles.” However, before moving on from Simon (alias Paul), it is worthy noting that he is sketched in a way that reveals what Magian skills are for the ancient author(s) who produced or retold this narrative, and the list is familiar to us by now: expertise in chanting over someone (incantations), in controlling or manipulating lower spirits (or: demons), and in invoking the souls of the dead for various purposes (esp. *Recognitions* 2.5-16; 3.55-57).

There are actually two different takes on the eastern or Persian origin of Magian ways and to their dissemination in the Pseudo-Clementine writings, the first being an elaborate theory of transmission in the *Recognitions* and the second being a story of improper worship established by Zoroaster, which is also an explanation of a series of empires, in the *Homilies*. Both are re-working related earlier traditions circulating around Clement and Peter in circles devoted to Jesus that thought of themselves as following Judean customs (which has led to the source critics’ idea of a *Grundschrift* or base-text dating to the second century CE).

First of all, the author of the *Recognitions* traces Magian skill far further back than our previous theorizers, back beyond the existence of Persians, even though Persians remain central (*Recognitions* 1.26-31; 4.26-31). The context here is Peter explaining the origins of Magian ways to the crowd due to

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45 Cf. Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.26; *Dialogue with Trypho* 120; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.23 and 1.25 ([link](#)).

a delay in the contest with Simon the Magian. One must fill the time. Although Peter's speech does not seem consistent in the details and chronology, ultimately Magian skill originates with the fallen angels of the Genesis narrative (Genesis 6 as also expanded in traditions associated with 1 Enoch, especially chapter 7): "the angels taught men that lower spirits could, by certain skills – that is, by Magian invocations – be made to obey men. And so, as from a furnace and workshop of wickedness, they filled the whole world with the smoke of impiety, the light of piety being withdrawn" (*Recognitions* 4.27). A similar introduction of Magian knowledge occurs in *Homilies* (8.14): "along with these stones used in Magian techniques (*mageutheisin*), they [the fallen angels / lower spirits] transmitted the skills pertaining to each thing, revealed Magian skill (*mageia*), and taught astronomy, and the powers of roots, and whatever the human mind was unable to discover." It is worth remembering that in the *Book of Watchers* (*1 Enoch* 6-11; ca. 200 BCE), the two traditions about fallen angels have Asael's and Shemihazah's groups wrongly revealing secrets to the women. On the one hand, Asael's group shares knowledge about metal-work (disseminating war), ornamentation for women (disseminating lust), roots (disseminating potions), the heavenly bodies and various other types of divination. And Shemihazah's group shares knowledge of medicine, chants, and roots (see especially *1 Enoch* 7-8 for both).<sup>46</sup> Either tradition could therefore be associated with Magian techniques if one wanted to cast such techniques as dangerous, as in the Pseudo-Clementine situation.<sup>47</sup> So the material underlying both *Recognitions* and

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46 For the reception history of the *Book of Watchers*, see Reed 2005, although she gives short shrift to the Pseudo-Clementine material.

47 Justin Martyr differs on this, since his main emphasis is on the fallen angels / lower spirits *using* Magian tricks (*magikōn strophōn*) to fool humanity more so than sharing Magian techniques (*Apology* 2.4.2). For Justin, followers of Jesus do leave behind Magian techniques (*magikai technai*) (1.14.1-2).

*Homilies* draws on similar Judean traditions (if not drawing on the *Book of Watchers* itself) in order to have this as the initial introduction of Magian knowledge to humanity.

However, according to *Recognitions*, there is then a subsequent re-discovery of these same techniques after the flood by Ham who passes it on to his descendants, especially Mesraim, identified with – or, better, transformed into – the Persian figure Zoroaster:

One of these, by name Ham, unfortunatley discovered the Magian skill and handed down the instruction of it to one of his sons, who was called Mesraim, from whom the descent group of the Egyptians, Babylonians and Persians are derived. The peoples who then existed called Mesraim “Zoroaster,” admiring him as originator of Magian skill in whose name many books on this subject exist. Therefore, since he [Mesraim / Zoroaster] was very and frequently focussed on the stars and wanted to be considered a god among them, he began to draw forth, as it were, certain sparks from the stars and to show them to men. The purpose of this was that the rude and ignorant might be astonished, as by a miracle.

Wanting to increase this estimation of him, he attempted these things again and again, until he was set on fire and consumed by the lower spirit (or: demon) himself, whom he accosted too persistently (*Recognitions* 4.27-28; cf. 1.29-30).<sup>48</sup>

Earlier in his speech, Peter had explained that the descendant of Ham, Nimrod (Nebroth), who reigned in Babylonia, “migrated to the Persians from Babylonia and taught them to worship fire” (*Recognitions* 1.29-30). The *Homilies* will identify Nimrod with Zoroaster, rather than Mesraim, but the author of *Recognitions* seems to be mixing his traditions up a bit and is not consistent. The key point that follows,

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48 Trans. T. Smith 1916, adapted. On the many (pseudepigraphical) works of Zoroaster, see Beck 1991.

though, is that Zoroaster introduced not only Magian techniques but virtually all forms of misguided or dangerous worship. All of this disseminated to surrounding peoples from Persia. Egyptians are included here, with those who competed with Moses just before the departure from Egypt being a key example. Many other Greek ethnographic discussions about Zoroaster tend towards viewing him as an admirable sage, another wise “barbarian,” but not the authors of the Pseudo-Clementine writings who make him responsible for the introduction of a lot of problems.<sup>49</sup>

In the *Homilies*, on the other hand, a speech by Peter focusses most attention on Zoroaster (in this case identified with Nimrod, great-grandson of Noah) as the origins of Magian technique, of the worship of fire, and of improper forms of worship overall (*Homilies* 9.1-8). This author is also concerned to show how the dissemination of Magian knowledge corresponds to dominance by successive world empires, however, beginning with the Persians and continuing from there.

In this scenario, Nimrod, here equated with Zoroaster, had taken up Magian teaching (*magikē*), which he used to force the “cosmos-guiding star of the evil one” to grant him supreme rule (*Homilies* 9.4). However, the evil one was not to happy about this manipulation and he burnt Nimrod / Zoroaster up with fire, which is the origin of the Persian practice of worshipping fire: “So the Magian Nimrod, after being destroyed by this lightning coming down to earth from heaven, had his name changed to Zoroaster, on account of the ‘living (*zōsan*) stream of the star (*aštēr*)’ being poured on him. But the unintelligent among contemporary people, thinking that through the love of god his soul had been fetched by lightning, buried the remains of his body and honoured his burial-place with a temple among the Persians” (*Homilies* 9.5).<sup>50</sup> Hence the beginning of improper worship. So the Persians are the first

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49 On these traditions, see Vasunia 2007; Jong 2015.

50 Trans. T. Smith, Peterson, and Donaldson 1916, adapted.

world empire possessing the burning coals from the fire that burnt Zoroaster and therefore possessing Magian knowledge, followed by the Babylonians and finally the Egyptians. (Even the sequence of world empires is, historically-speaking, mixed up, but we can see that the priority of Persians is the guiding principle, so they need to come first). Deceptive Magians are here credited with introducing all forms of false worship among Persians, Babylonians, and Egyptians (*Homilies* 9.7). Peter has come to bring you the alternative, true Judean wisdom that will itself effectively control the lower spirits, by the way (*Homilies* 9.8).

Evidently, the foreign, Persian character of Magian ways remained central in the ethnographic imagination through the second to fourth centuries, when the Pseudo-Clementines gradually came into the form we now have them. The Persian atmosphere remained around Magians and their activities in the imagination of many elite thinkers throughout this period.

### ***Conclusion***

There is no one approach to Magian matters (*mageia*, *magikē*) among the various elite authors I have explored, even if there are overlaps. Each differs in the balance of idealizing or pejorative evaluations and in how to view and explain the details. There is considerable flexibility in referents and deployments of these Magian concepts, then. However, all share in common the *perception* that these activities were in some sense Persian or from eastern peoples and all immediately turn to conversations about peoples, relations between them, and distinctions or similarities among them in order to make sense of Magian ways. At times, this is also clearly part of the attempt to assert a place for one's own people or sub-group in a superior position in broader conversations about, and competitions with, other

peoples. Sometimes this entailed aligning one's own group with an ostensible foreign but superior group (e.g. the trope of wise "barbarians") and sometimes it involved defining one's own people in opposition to such foreign ways, or a mixture of both. These are often-neglected ethnographic discourses pointing to processes of ethnic identification with an imaginative life of their own, rather than data to reconstruct the nature, character, and development of any specific, enduring social practices or customs, let alone "magic" performed by "magicians."



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